

## Ready to Rumble for justice

By: SCOTT MARSHALL - Staff Writer  
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Appointed attorney takes on several prominent local murder cases

NORTH COUNTY ---- Some would-be lawyers aspire to fame or fortune when they leave law school. Wil Rumble says he had something different in mind.

The 46-year-old attorney and North County resident has focused his career on representing defendants who cannot afford private attorneys.

Today, he works in San Diego County's Multiple Conflicts Office defending clients in some of the county's most serious cases, including three high-profile North County cases involving defendants charged with murder.

"My job is to protect my client from what (U.S. Supreme Court) Justice Thurgood Marshall said was the 'awesome power of the state,' " Rumble said in a recent interview.



Wil Rumble, an attorney with San Diego County's Multiple Conflicts Office, is representing three defendants in high-profile murder cases in North County. His office defends clients who can't afford private attorneys but who can't be represented by the county's public defenders because of conflicts of interest.

Some of Rumble's clients face the state's most severe punishment. He is defending three men charged with murders in North County who could face life in prison without parole or, in one case, the death penalty, if they are convicted.

### North County cases

One is Penifoti Taeotui, 17, one of three teens charged as adults with murder in connection with the Dec. 20, 2006, shooting death of Oceanside police Officer Dan Bessant. Bessant was slain shortly after he arrived to provide backup for a fellow officer during a traffic stop in a northeast Oceanside neighborhood that has a history of gang violence.

The public defender's office and alternate public defender's office have been appointed to represent the other youths charged in the case, so those offices could not provide attorneys for Taeotui, as well.

Rumble also represents Jason Duane Cooper, who is alleged to have stabbed his mother-in-law and sister-in-law to death in April 2006 at their Fallbrook home. Charged with two counts of murder, Cooper has pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity.

A Superior Court judge decided the public defender's office had a conflict and could not represent Cooper. Rumble was named Cooper's new defense attorney.

Yet another conflict of interest prompted a judge three weeks ago to name Rumble to replace the alternate public defender's office as the attorney for Derlyn Ray Threats, 26.

The former Marine sergeant could face the death penalty if he is convicted of first-degree murder in connection with the stabbing death of Carolyn Rebecca Neville, 24. Threats allegedly killed the Vista woman after she interrupted a burglary at her home shortly after taking her son to kindergarten.

All three cases are still pending.

### **Multiple conflicts**

San Diego County created the Multiple Conflicts Office about two years ago, amid concerns about the high cost of appointing private attorneys for indigent defendants when public defenders had conflicts of interest. Those conflicts typically arise when witnesses have previously themselves been represented by attorneys in the public defender's or alternate public defender's offices. When such conflicts arise in serious felony cases, the case is given to the Multiple Conflicts Office's four attorneys.

Attorney Dan Mangarin, the director of the Multiple Conflicts Office, said he brought Rumble over with him from the alternate public defender's office because he knew Rumble "would be able to tackle the most difficult cases and the most difficult clients."

Rumble has a "keen legal mind" but is "very humble" and is "very respectful of everyone," Mangarin said.

"He's basically my go-to person," Mangarin said.

When both worked in the alternate public defender's office, Mangarin and Rumble defended David Dean Watkins at his 2003 trial for the murder of Lillie Mae Brown, 82, of San Diego. Jurors convicted Watkins of the murder, but decided that he should not receive the death penalty for the crime.

Deputy District Attorney Paul Greenwood, who prosecuted Watkins, said his experience with Rumble was "positive." Rumble was "extremely helpful to work with," "polite," and "professional," Greenwood said.

"You could tell he was obviously going to do well in his legal career," Greenwood said.

### **Dinner-table docket**

That career's origins lay in Rumble's childhood in New York, he said, when family dinners sometimes included discussions in which everyone was encouraged to "argue your case." His father, who shares his name, is a constitutional law professor; Rumble's mother was a social work volunteer.

Rumble said his mother, Kirk Rumble, who passed away five years ago, took him to civil rights protests when he was a child. She also took him to court, he said, through her involvement with the Fund for Modern Courts, a nonprofit court reform organization in New York.

"She always knew I'd be a criminal defense attorney even when I didn't know it," Rumble said.

After being "irresponsible to an extreme degree" in his youth, he said, Rumble left college in New Jersey and left home for California in 1981 with \$250 and no plan for his future. He said he worked at an airport rental car company in San Diego before deciding to return to school.

After graduating in 1986 from UC San Diego with a degree in communications, Rumble worked as a truck driver and delivery person for the university. Then he unsuccessfully tried to make it as an actor in

Hollywood. Then he worked for the state bar association before deciding to enter law school at the University of San Francisco in 1991, he said.

Rumble said for a year in law school, he worked at a civil rights clinic. One memorable case found him helping the family of a man killed in an officer-involved shooting in Tulare County, he said.

In his last semester of law school, an ethics professor told Rumble he should be a public defender, Rumble said.

"I really believe in the work," Rumble said. "It's incredibly important. It's incredibly challenging. It's incredibly rewarding, and at times, it's demoralizing when your client suffers the consequences.

"My soul is into this job. It's all I really imagine doing."

Rumble said his life has been different than the lives of his clients, but that the "tough times" he has experienced help him in his work for them.

"I've been given a lot of opportunities, and I want to try to do what I can in my clients' lives to give them second chances," Rumble said.

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Wil Rumble of the county's Multiple Conflicts Office has been appointed to represent defendants in three high-profile murder cases pending in North County. They are:

Penifoti Taeotui, 17. Taeotui is one of three teens charged with murder in connection with the Dec. 20, 2006, shooting death of Oceanside police Officer Dan Bessant. A preliminary hearing to determine whether enough evidence exists to make Taeotui, Meki Gaono, 18, and Jose Compre, 17, stand trial on murder charges is scheduled for March 4 in the Superior Court in Vista.

Jason Duane Cooper, 26. Charged with two counts of murder in connection with the April 26, 2006, stabbing deaths of his mother-in-law and sister-in-law in their Fallbrook home, Cooper has pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity. His trial is scheduled to begin with jury selection on April 14 in the Superior Court in Vista.

Derlyn Ray Threats, 26. The district attorney's office is seeking the death penalty for Threats if he is convicted of murdering Carolyn Rebecca Neville, 24, on Sept. 1, 2005, during a burglary of her Vista home. A conflict of interest with the alternate public defender's office prompted a judge on Jan. 4 to appoint a new attorney, Rumble, to represent Threats, who has pleaded not guilty. A status conference at which a trial date may be set is scheduled for Feb. 25 in the Superior Court in Vista.